Timothy Christian High School Commencement Address
Oak Brook, IL
John Buchanan
June 2, 2011

Mr. Rinsema, Board of Trustees, faculty and staff of Timothy Christian High School, parents, families, friends and most important of all - young women and men of the hour - graduating seniors, Class of 2011. What a moment this.

It's a great moment for your families, your parents particularly I know because I have sat where they are sitting this evening five times - they are awash in a sea of emotion:

- relief - that you made it: it's actually happening
- a little sadness that the wonderful experience of parenting you through birth and childhood and adolescence, through what my church used to call in the old liturgy for infant baptism "the perils of childhood and the temptations of youth". . . in any event your parents' parenting changes, tonight, transforms into a wonderful new stage of life. But, they are, I know, a little wistful this evening. They're thinking about the day you were born, the day they brought you home from the hospital, the day you went off to school on your own, the day you rode a two wheel bike alone.
- They are also incredibly proud of you. You are and always will be their child. Having you was one of the best things they ever did: they know it this evening in a particular way and they are very proud of you.
- And love - there is more love in their hearts this evening than their hearts can contain and it will spill over a bit and they will have to take out a Kleenex and dab their eyes a time or two.

I know all this because I've been there five times. As a matter of fact, 24 hours ago I was sitting in a big auditorium in Dallas watching a beautiful granddaughter process down the aisle and both my wife and I were using Kleenex.

If you don't do anything else this evening, find them and say, "Mom and Dad - thank you for making all this possible, for making me possible. I love you." Say that, too, tonight. Don't ever miss an opportunity to say, "I love you."

The faculty and administration and staff of this school are also proud of you. They have a major investment in you. They too are pleased and proud. And they are smiling tonight because you're leaving, and the school

year is over, and they get a little break before beginning the amazing process of nurturing and enabling and teaching and stimulating all over again.

I am particularly pleased to have been invited to share this occasion with you. Two of the graduating seniors are, along with their families, members of Fourth Presbyterian Church, Peter Schemper and Abigail Canfield. Peter is a member of the church Session, our governing board. His mother, Sue Schemper, has been affiliated with Timothy Christian for many years and has also served on the Session. Peter's father, Tom Schemper, is the Director of our Counseling Center. Abigail Canfield and her family, parents Dennis and Anne Marie, are also faithful Fourth Presbyterian members, active in Sunday School and youth programs. I'm honored to be with them on this special occasion and I hope I won't say anything to embarrass Peter and Abigail.

When Mr. Rinsema invited me to be your commencement speaker I read as much as I could find about Timothy Christian, its history and values and mission. And, I don't mind telling you that what I read inspired me and made me wish I had attended a school like this:

- Every child at Timothy Christian, from the highly gifted to those requiring remedial help, is viewed as a gift from God and an image-bearer of Christ.

- The school mission statement talks about preparing students for service in the spirit of Jesus Christ. It talks about preparing students to transform the world - and to be counter-culture beacons of light.

- This place has had very high expectations for you, has simply expected and assumed that you will do great things in service to humankind.

By the time I was done reading I was considering asking if an age exception could be made so I could enroll next fall.

What sealed the deal was when I read that your four by 800 meter relay team won the state championship with a blistering time of 9:36, a new school record: Seniors Kate and Jordyn, and Freshmen Anne and Abby: so there are more victories and records ahead.

Part of what those four young women learned, and part of what this school has imparted to each of you is that you have more in you, more potential for good, for accomplishment, for service, more potential for life and love than you ever imagined or realized.

I was asked recently to identify the teachers who had the biggest impact on my life. And without exception it was the ones whose demands were very high, sometimes uncomfortably high: the Latin teacher, chemistry teacher, track coach - who saw more in me than I knew was in there, more than I planned to produce. They pushed, prodded, risked damaging my fragile adolescent ego, and hurting my feelings – and I thank God for them, every day.

You are blessed to have experienced a high school environment like that . . . I'm guessing that every one of you can name teachers like that – and that you will thank God for them along the way. In fact, why don't you start tonight? After you've thanked your parents and told them you love them, find a teacher or two or three and say "thank you" – and maybe even risk an "I love you" while you're at it.

I was impressed to learn that your class chose Ephesians 4: 4-6 for your class text:

"There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one Faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all."

I particularly like that "above all, through all, in all" business - that's a really big God. A generation ago a British clergyman and theologian, J. B. Phillips, wrote a book everybody was reading and talking about, *Your God is Too Small*. His point was that most people have an idea of God that isn't nearly big enough, and simply doesn't come close to doing justice to the God of the Bible – who is "above all and through all and in all." Phillips said that for some people God is a "Resident Policeman, a Big Parent in the Sky, a Grand Old Man Upstairs . . . a Stern Judge," one of the most popular images of God. One of my favorite authors, Anne Lamott, says that the God of a lot of Christians she knows reminds her of a high school principal (certainly not Mr. Rinsema!) going through your records and files and not liking what he is finding there.

Someone is always trying to reduce God to manageable proportions – or co-opting God to support our favorite social or economic or political positions. But the God of the Bible, the God St. Paul said is above all and through all and in all – is not the God of the Republican Party, or the Democratic Party, or the Tea Party. God is God – above all – through and in all.

In the years ahead you will encounter ideas, concepts, theories that seem to threaten what you believe about God. You will encounter, in the

time ahead, ideas like evolutionary biology that seem, at first, to contradict what the Bible says about creation and how you and I got here. You will encounter a scientific determinism that says it's all about DNA, and genes, and impulses embedded deep in our brains, not the image of God in us. You will encounter social and political and economic theory that simply doesn't seem compatible with what we believe as Christians. And you will encounter a newly fashionable atheism that says your faith is silly, childish, sometimes toxic and lethal, and the world would be better off without it. When it happens – and it's a good thing, it's part of becoming a thinking, mature, rational human being to have all your assumptions challenged – when it happens, my advice is to remember your class text: that God is above all, and through all and in all. You don't have to protect God from science, or social theory, or literature or art, or from atheism. God is God - God is a really big God. God is above all and through all and in all.

Don't run away from intellectual challenges to Christian faith: embrace them, listen to them, learn from them, and remember – above all - through all - in all.

As a matter of fact you don't have to be afraid of anything. This is commencement season and a celebrity speaker (I forgot who), surprised the senior class by saying, "I have two words of advice for you today: 'Don't go.' It's a big mess out there: 'Don't go!'"

He was being facetious of course. But he was also speaking truth. It is scary out there and fear is in the air. But you know, instead of "Don't Go," the Bible – the entire witness of Judeo-Christian faith - is another two words of advice: "Fear not." A friend of mine, who is one of the most distinguished Biblical scholars in the world, says that the message of the whole Bible, Old and New Testaments, can be expressed in two words, "Fear not." It's in the Bible from beginning to end. When the angel comes to Mary to tell her she's going to have a child – his first words are "Fear not." When the child is born and a sky-full of angels terrify a group of shepherds, an angel says again – "Fear not." And early in the morning, at a garden tomb on the first day of the week, an angel comes to frightened disciples and says "Fear not." When the risen Christ returns and surprises his friends, the first thing he says is "Fear not."

There is nothing to fear – ever- because Jesus promised to be with us – you and me – until the end of the age. During baptism in most churches – during your baptism years ago – the minister poured water on your head and said your name, and then said words that strike me deeply and powerfully every time I repeat them: "Peter-Abigail-John-Sara-Andrew-Rebecca- you are a child of God and you belong to Jesus Christ forever."

On April 7, 1805 Captain Meriwether Lewis was lying on his bedroll in his tent, pitched somewhere in the Dakotas, writing by candlelight in his diary. Lewis and William Clark were leading an expedition commissioned by President Thomas Jefferson, to find out as much as they could about the vast new territories recently purchased from France.

The expedition had proceeded thus far in canoes and most important of all, a large boat which carried supplies, weapons, ammunition, food and a secure refuge. But now they had run out of navigable water somewhere in the Dakotas. The big boat could go no further. From here on they were on their own. Lewis watched that boat slowly turn around and float down the river, out of sight, and that night wrote in his journal:

"The picture which now presented itself to me was a most pleasing one, entertaining as I do, the most confident hope of succeeding in a voyage which had formed a darling project of mine for the last ten years, I could but esteem this moment of my departure as among the most happy of my life" (Stephen Ambrose, *Undaunted Courage*, p. 212).

"Happy" is not the word that comes to mind. "Anxious," "worried," "scared to death" seem more likely. It's difficult to imagine a more precarious, uncertain, dangerous moment than standing on the edge of a vast and frightening unknown and watching all visible means of support, safety, security disappear down the river.

As a matter of fact it sounds a little like you this evening, sitting there in your graduation garments, surrounded by loving families and friends - after something like 12, 13, 14 years of education, launching now on your "darling project" whatever that turns out to be, while the security of this place: classrooms, gymnasium, auditorium, familiar teachers who cared, supported, nurtured, and yes, loved you - is in the process of turning around and floating down the river, soon out of sight.

Do not be afraid. You will never be alone. No matter where you are, no matter what happens to you, the one who created you and called you by name, the one who holds you in the palm of his hand, has promised to be with you every day of your lives.

"I could but esteem this moment as among the most happy of my life" Meriwether Lewis wrote. And that is my prayer for you. God bless you on your way.